

The Proprietors beg to announce, that a
 LARGE AND BEAUTIFUL ENGRAVING
 OF THE
INFANT ORPHAN ASYLUM,
 FROM THE DESIGN OF
 MESSRS. SCOTT AND MOFFATT,
 Will be given in the next week's Number!

THE BUILDER,

NO. XXXVII.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 21, 1843.

MODERN FRESCO PAINTING.

THE great interest this subject has excited, and which will necessarily increase as the period approaches for executing the proposed interior decorations of the new Houses of Parliament, has induced us to refer to the report of the Commissioners on the Fine Arts (session 1842) with a view to a generally diffused knowledge of the practical information obtained at so much labour and cost.

Fresco painting has for some years past been much cultivated in Germany, particularly at Munich, the capital of Bavaria, where many churches and some public buildings are decorated in this manner; the commissioners have availed themselves of the experience of the German professors of the art to shridge the experimental labours of our own painters in operating upon a material new to them, and of which the preparation, after tried methods, appears to be one of the essentials of success. Italy had been resorted to by the Germans, not only for conception of the grandeur of style for which fresco is so well adapted, but for the best method of coating walls to receive the paintings. The facts elicited, though sought and obtained for this especial purpose, are interesting to the building craft at large, inasmuch as the treatment of *lime*, and the admixtures requisite for producing the finest, and at the same time most durable surfaces, is of great importance. The principal point with respect to lime seems to be the advantage resulting from its being kept in a slaked state, and excluded from the external air, for a very long period. The preparation at Genoa is thus stated by Mr. C. Wilson, Professor of ornamental design in the Royal Edinburgh Institution, from personal observation. The lime, having been slaked, is received in a trough six feet in length and twenty inches wide, narrowing to the bottom; the lime is stirred in this vessel, and water thrown in until it is of the consistence of cream. At the end of the trough there is a little sluice opening within an inch or two of the bottom, which suffers the dilute lime to pass, but retains gravel and other impurities; the lime is received in a pit dug in the mere earth to the depth of several feet; the process is repeated until the pit is full, and the lime thus prepared is left from eight to twelve months, according to its ascertained strength, before it is fit for use.

This ablation, while it effectually slakes every particle and frees the lime from all extraneous and heavy matter, serves also to deprive it of a portion of its more caustic property, and in a like proportion destroys also that of cohesion; subsequently, however, and upon the preparation of this putty-like substance as mortar, walls plastered therewith assume, by rapid absorption of carbonic acid from the atmosphere, a surface of very great hardness and durability. This, says the report, is what takes

place during and after the process of fresco painting; moisture being always the medium—the conductor, so to speak, of carbonic acid, which effects the induration. The Germans seem to have varied, if they have not improved the method just described. At Munich a pit is filled with clean burned limestone, which on being slaked is stirred continually till the substance is of an impalpable consistence. The surface having settled to a level, clean river sand is spread over it to the depth of a foot or more, and the whole is covered with earth, so that the air is perfectly excluded. In this state the lime remains for at least three years before it is considered fit for use as a ground for fresco; but whatever may be the difference in the mode of storing lime for the finer descriptions of plaster-work, it is sufficiently ascertained that rich limes can be kept in a moist state for any length of time. The general result is supposed to be, first, to render the lime mild, and next to improve its consistence; assuming, then, that the effect of keeping pure lime in pits is to promote a more perfect comminution of the particles, the result is as completely attained by the practice of the Genoese masons, as by that of the Germans. It must be observed that the process is objected to by modern writers on cements for building purposes, because it reduces the strength of the lime, or, in other words, renders it less caustic; this, however, is its principal recommendation to the fresco painter, whose brushes and more tender colours would suffer by contact with a highly caustic surface. The first, or rough coat of plaster applied to walls intended to receive frescos, is composed of the usual proportions of one part of the prepared lime and two of sand. No hair is used by the Italian plasterers. The rough coat being thoroughly dry and seasoned, the *intonaco* or coat of fine plaster is applied; in Italy much care is taken in preparing it; the lime is taken out of the pit with a spade, but not from too near the bottom or sides. It is thrown again into the troughs, mixed with water until not thicker than milk, and is allowed to escape as before through the open sluice, passing through a fine hair-sieve into earthenware jars. The lime being allowed to settle, the clear water is poured off, and the lime remains about the consistence of white paint, and quite as smooth.

The *intonaco* is composed of two parts sand and one of lime. In Italy great pains are taken to procure a suitable sand; it must be perfectly clean and sharp, the grains of equal size, and its colour favourable, or the *intonaco* would be too dark. The presence of any earthy particles in the plaster would inevitably ruin the fresco. The plaster should be laid on lightly and freely with a wooden hand float; in connecting the successive patches, some portions require, however, to be finished with an iron trowel; in this case care must be taken not to press too strongly, otherwise rust spots might appear in the lime; a glass float seems preferable where a wooden instrument is unfit. The plaster should be about a quarter of an inch in thickness; the surface of the last coat is then slightly roughened to render it fitter for painting on.

Mr. A. Wilson, writing in March, 1842, gives the following very interesting description of modern fresco painting, from actual observation: "I lately went to the royal palace (Genoa) to see Signor Pasquino paint a ceiling in fresco. His tints had all been prepared before my arrival; he had only two in pots, viz. pure lime, and a very pale flesh tint. He had no palette, but a table with a large slate for

the top; on it he set in a circle: 1. Terra vert 2. Smalt; 3. Vermilion; 4. Yellow ochre; 5. Roman ochre; 6. Darker ochre; 7. Venetian red; 8. Umber; 9. Burnt umber; 10. Black. These colours were all pure, mixed only with water, and rather stiff; put down with a palette knife, perhaps about an ounce or two at most of each. He mixed each tint as he wanted it, adding to each from the pot of flesh tint or that of white. Near him lay a lump of umber, and on taking up a brushful of colour he touched this with it; the earth instantly absorbed the water, and he was thus enabled to judge of the appearance which the tint would present when dry. The painter used a reeding stick with cotton on the top to prevent injury to the *intonaco*. The *intonaco* being prepared in the manner previously described, the moment it would bear touching, he set to work. The head was that of the Virgin; he began with a pale tint of yellow round the head for the glory (the colour of the ground, owing to the mixture of sand with the lime, it is to be remembered, is a cool middle tint); he then laid in the head and neck with a pale flesh colour, and the masses of drapery round the head and shoulders with a middle tint, and with brown and black in the shadows. He next, with terra vert and white, threw in the cool tints of the face; then, with a pale tint of umber and white, modelled in the features, covered with the same tint where the hair was to be seen, and with it also indicated the folds of the white veil. All this time he used the colours as *this* as we do in water colours; he touched the *intonaco* with great tenderness, and allowed ten minutes to elapse before touching the same spot a second time. He now brought his coloured study, which stood on an easel near him, and began to model the features, and to throw in the shades with greater accuracy. He put colour in the cheeks and put in the mouth slightly, then shaded the hair and drapery, deepening always with the same colours, which became darker and darker every time they are applied, as would be the case on paper, for instance. Having worked for half an hour, he made a halt for ten minutes, during which time he occupied himself in mixing darker tints, and then began finishing, loading the lights and using the colours much stiffer, and putting down his touches with precision and firmness; he softened with a brush with a little water in it. Another rest of ten minutes; but by this time he had nearly finished the head and shoulders of his figure, which being as uniformly well looked exactly like a picture in oil, and the colours seemed blended with equal facility. Referring again to his oil study, he put in some few light touches for the hair, again brightened generally in the lights, touched too into the darks, threw a little white into the yellow round the head, and this portion of his composition was finished all in about an hour and a half. This was rapid work; but it must be observed that the artist rested four times, so as to allow the wet to be sufficiently absorbed, to enable him to re-apply his work.

"The artist now required an addition of *intonaco*, the tracing was lifted up to the ceiling, and the space to be covered being marked by the painter, the process was repeated, and the body and arms of the Madonna were finished before I left him, at one o'clock."

Pews.—In Westminster Abbey the choir is to be altered, the present miserable screen-work is to be removed, and pews substituted. In the cathedral at Canterbury the choir is about to be furnished with new stalls and a throne; and the pews are to be removed. The new church in the Broadway, Westminster, has been built without pews.